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# The Emergent European Model in Skill Formation: Comparing Higher Education and Vocational Training in the Bologna and Copenhagen Processes

Justin J.W. Powell<sup>1</sup>, Nadine Bernhard<sup>1</sup>, and Lukas Graf<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Proposing an alternative to the American model, intergovernmental reform initiatives in Europe have developed and promote a comprehensive European model of skill formation. What ideals, standards, and governance are proposed in this new pan-European model? This model responds to heightened global competition among “knowledge societies” as it challenges national systems to improve. The authors thus compare this emergent European model with the historically influential models of Germany, France, Great Britain, and the United States. To what extent does the European model resemble these traditionally influential national models? The authors report findings of a theory-guided content analysis of official European policy documents in higher education and vocational training from 1998 to 2010. They find that while the European model is a bricolage that integrates diverse characteristics of influential models, the ambitious goals and standards codified in the twin Bologna and Copenhagen processes in higher education and vocational training offer a new model to compete internationally. Dozens of countries now seek to implement these principles. This comparative analysis finds different visions for the future of skill formation on both sides of the Atlantic.

## Keywords

higher education, vocational education and training, educational model, Europeanization, Bologna process, Copenhagen process

As awareness of education’s importance for social and political participation as well as economic productivity has diffused, countries have witnessed massive educational and science expansion, beginning in the postwar United States and spreading globally since then (Meyer 2010). The diffusion of ideas—their translation and transfer across national boundaries—has been crucial in guiding these ongoing education reforms. More than ever, countries calling themselves “knowledge societies” explicitly compete with each other through human capital investment (Mayer and Solga 2008), and contemporary reforms aim to improve skill-formation systems as global

competition increases. The Lisbon strategy in Europe set about to create “the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world” (European Council 2004), reflecting broader international ideals such as quality,

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employability, and lifelong learning. Countries share such key ideals, goals, and norms but also develop and maintain contrasting foci, deeply embedded in institutional arrangements that span the nexus of vocational education and training (VET), higher education (HE), and the education/economy divide (Powell and Solga 2010, 2011).

European skill formation, for more than a decade, has been transformed by two parallel intergovernmental “soft law” processes—Bologna (HE) and Copenhagen (VET)—building on the basis of decades of prior European initiatives. The Bologna process (1998/1999–) has established a Europe-wide HE area to facilitate individual cross-border mobility, coordinated national quality assurance, the transparency and recognition of qualifications obtained elsewhere, and mutual recognition of duration and degrees of study courses. The Copenhagen process (2002–) has enhanced European cooperation in VET. Goals include a unitary framework of qualifications and competencies, a system of VET credit transfer, common quality criteria, and improvements in citizens’ access to education and training. Today, dozens of countries have recognized the Bologna and Copenhagen templates as significant models—and implement their standards. Increasingly, these European processes extend their influence globally, having entered their second decade. However, explicitly comparative research that systematically investigates both the sources and the consequences of these parallel initiatives remains scarce. Critiques of the nation-state as the point of reference for most studies are launched more frequently than are contributions designed to overcome this black box. Here, we began to systematically explore what the European model consists of, finding that these transnational processes of collaboration in reforming skill formation reflect a multitude of influences—and the impact of new modes of supranational governance. As such diffusion of this educational model across national borders accelerates, we lack analyses of just what it proposes. That is a precondition for understanding what the consequences of its diffusion will likely be, whether convergence or persistent cross-national differences (Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008:141).

As a particular form of internationalization, Bologna and Copenhagen carry certain cultural models and ideas such as economic competitiveness or “education societies” across borders. Following decades of European programs to facilitate educational expansion as well as build bridges

between countries, the Bologna and Copenhagen processes are the latest—considerably intensified—phase in the ongoing “Europeanization” of national skill-formation systems (see Powell and Trampusch 2012). Even though voluntary, Bologna and Copenhagen exert direct pressure on national systems and indirectly influence debates and decision making (see Ravinet 2008). These processes are not managed just from above, via supranational institutions and decision making, because they have been constructed primarily by national government officials in interaction with and with the participation of myriad stakeholders: This is not a unidirectional relationship but rather a form of bottom-up and top-down diffusion. Although Bologna and Copenhagen reflect soft law developments that are by no means completed, the consensual model developed in these decade-long deliberations is ripe for analysis. When analyzed, these reforms are too rarely viewed in concert, and much is simply ascribed to them without concrete reference to their actual contents. Thus, we begin the task of investigating the substance and development of this European model and identifying similarities and differences to leading national models.

The United States has become the prime model in HE due to its strength in research and development. But European countries, especially Germany, are the leading global exporters of models in VET (Culpepper and Finegold 1999). We specify here the ideational, normative, and regulative dimensions of four influential national models and the emergent European model and systematically compare the ideals, goals, and norms that constitute them. In Continental Europe, far more than in the United States or Great Britain, VET and HE are viewed as jointly crucial to provide the needed skills to successfully compete globally. Because in many European countries a large proportion of each cohort participates in VET, adequate transatlantic comparisons of skill formation must include VET. Thus, we analyze the organizational fields of HE and VET together to better understand the contemporary transformation of skill formation.

Specifically, to understand the challenges to national skill-formation systems posed by these reforms, we focus especially on educational ideologies and norms. We examine to what extent these recent European initiatives are leading to a comprehensive European model of skill formation, which we contrast with ideal-typical representations of historically influential national models.

We report findings of a theory-guided content analysis of official European policy documents from 1998 to 2010. Linking ideals and norms in HE and VET, we compare key characteristics of the new European model with the German, French, British, and American national models (Ben-David [1977] 1992; Bosch and Charest 2010; Clark 1993; Clark and Winch 2007; Cummings 1999; Goldschmidt 1991). We ask what characterizes these different national models and which elements of these are represented in the European model. We show that this emergent model is composed of diverse characteristics—a bricolage—found in those dominant national models. Our comparative analysis identifies two very different visions for the future of HE and VET. Unlike the United States, which focuses most of its energies on HE, crowding out VET, the European countries have developed a broader model to address the key challenges faced by societies undergoing major economic and technological change. This model builds on the strengths of both fields without narrowly specifying contents or norms; this lack of specificity is characteristic of the European model and gives member states flexibility. The ideal is one of continuously developing knowledgeable individuals basing their careers on work-based learning (VET) and/or education in competitive research universities (HE) to ensure employability in knowledge societies.

## COMPARING MODELS IN SKILL FORMATION

Our approach integrates two comparative components: contrasts of the contents of the European initiatives in HE and VET as well as the systematic cross-national comparison of models' ideas, standards, and policies. Instead of a descriptive stocktaking of recent interpretation or implementation processes in individual countries, this article provides a synthetic analysis of the emergent contemporary model of skill formation in Europe. We contrast it to leading national models, selecting a few historically most influential models, such as those focused on the apprenticeship, the undergraduate college, or the research university. We argue that the Bologna and Copenhagen processes must be investigated in concert, which has not been done sufficiently either in national or in transnational studies.

## *Diffusion and Comparative Institutional Analysis*

Although rising transnationalization challenges traditional nation-based analyses of institutional change in education, most research continues to be conducted within national frameworks. A range of studies—from descriptive country studies to more ambitious historical and geographical comparisons—emphasizes the effects of internationalization on HE organizations (e.g., Graf 2009). The importance of training systems for comparative advantages is emphasized in the “varieties of capitalism” debate that shows persistent cross-national differences (e.g., Hall and Soskice 2001). Furthermore, studies usually examine only one of the two major organizational fields in skill formation—either HE or VET (but see Moodie 2008). Existing comparative analyses often discount long-standing differences in skill-formation systems and in the foundational ideas and principles undergirding them. Neo-institutional analyses of skill formation contribute to uncovering the ideologies, values, and assumptions that guide educators and policy makers as they attempt to optimize these institutions and organizations based on continuous comparisons with other countries.

Diffusion, or transmission, is central in studies of institutional change as well as stability in the face of incrementally altered or transformed conditions (Campbell 2004:21). Comparative institutional analyses aim to better analyze processes of diffusion, learning, and emulation (see Morgan et al. 2010). General, abstract paradigms flow beyond borders without direct policy interventions, especially in the field of education policy, which remains clearly in the national domain. However, all countries have been and are enormously influenced by ideas and norms espoused in foreign models of education. Policy diffusion processes depend on a range of mechanisms, from social construction (such as the framing of problems and solutions), learning, and competition to coercive governance (Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett 2007). The soft law technologies used in European skill-formation reform depend largely on the noncoercive mechanisms since national policy makers volunteer to participate in intergovernmental processes. Thus, the diffusion relating to the emerging European model results from the representatives of differing national models interacting as they bring their perspectives, priorities, and preferences to the negotiating table.

The rise of systematic cross-national comparisons and competition is visible at every level of governance. National and international organizations utilize knowledge of other countries to frame problems, guide learning, and organize competition. Concepts such as lifelong learning and standards (from competence and participation developments to achievement and attainment rates) are increasingly specified by international organizations, via comparative research, benchmarking, and agenda setting (see Jakobi 2009; Meyer 2010). For better or worse, ours is an age of rankings, league tables, and benchmarking. Similar comparative mechanisms are central to the Bologna and Copenhagen processes, visible in the stocktaking reports (e.g., Zgaga 2003). In reacting to intergovernmental initiatives, countries accept the rules of the game, which often create winners and losers, especially with benchmarking that often relies on formal assessments of student performance (see Baker and LeTendre 2005; Kamens and McNeely 2010).

The comparison of strong national models in European and American skill formation—and persistent differences in contemporary systems—raises questions about which of these influential, and distinct, models is paramount in the Bologna and Copenhagen processes. This is especially so because the open method of coordination—as a method of multilevel governance in Europe—neither officially sanctions noncompliance nor requires convergence, even if standardization to enhance mobility is a key pan-European goal.<sup>1</sup> As a relatively new means of European governance based on the voluntary cooperation of its member states and different national and European actors, the open method of coordination creates a “new architecture of experimentalist governance” that emphasizes noncoercive mutual feedback processes of planning, examination, comparison, and adjustment of policies (Sabel and Zeitlin 2007). This method seems particularly relevant for skill formation, which remains within the purview of nation-states. Both Bologna and Copenhagen processes facilitate cross-national policy learning, standardization, and the internationalization of educational norms (see Balzer and Rusconi 2007; Powell and Solga 2010).

### *Seeking Legitimacy: Borrowing from Others and the “International Argument”*

As culture-specific solutions to the demands of creating an educated citizenry to guarantee social

inclusion and trained workers to secure production, national skill-formation institutions must attain and maintain their legitimacy. Often, they achieve this by incremental improvements of continuous reforms rather than wholesale transformation (Thelen 2004; Tyack and Cuban 1995). In that quest, the power of “international arguments” (Gonon 1998) has not diminished over 200 years; far more, it has been systematically increased—regardless of foreign models’ immediate relevance or even applicability. However, we argue that the Bologna and Copenhagen processes represent an emerging truly European model that is influential not only within European countries but globally. As Steiner-Khamsi (2010) argues, transnational educational borrowing often acts as coalition builder, smoothing policy conflicts as it enables competing interest groups—as they refer to seemingly neutral “international standards”—to consensually support a further option. In this sense, these reforms also have been used as a device to increase the legitimacy of domestic reform agendas (see Musselin 2009).

Intergovernmental conferences reveal systematic opportunities to diffuse ideals and standards. The national representatives and stakeholders put forth their own visions and experiences emphasizing their skill-formation systems’ traditional strengths and argue for best practices, which are then combined in one European model. In sum, the European consensus revealed in the Bologna and Copenhagen declarations is a result of more or less explicit diffusion processes from the bottom up. Yet what are the ideals, standards, and policies proposed in the consensual documents guiding the ongoing Bologna and Copenhagen processes?

### *Three Institutional Dimensions: Ideas, Standards, and Policies*

We follow Scott (2008) in defining institutions as cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behavior. Representing models broadly, we sort the characteristics of the emerging European model along these institutional dimensions. Because of the European Union’s (EU’s) limited competence in educational governance and its standardization initiatives, we expect that cultural-cognitive and normative aspects—and the corresponding “mimetic” and “normative” mechanisms of diffusion—are more likely to be found than the regulative and “coercive” (see

DiMaggio and Powell 1983). While the boundaries between dimensions are often fluid, there are important distinctions. We analyze the cultural-cognitive dimensions as ideals in HE and VET and how these European processes legitimate the pursuit of certain goals. We investigate the normative dimension carrying out those ideals, proposed target groups, the organization of learning and training, and standards and norms to be met. We view the regulative dimension as referring to politics and governance, such as the actors involved in decision making, and education finance. These dimensions help to distinguish the considerable diversity in the themes found in the declarations and communiqués.

In cultural-cognitive terms, we expect that many ideas and concepts will be proposed and advocated because all countries' educational systems have a range of functions and everyone participates in them—is thus affected by them directly. Deliberations may well be contentious and thus lead to the proposal of diverse elements that can earn broader support for intergovernmental agreements. At the same time, the European model should also orient itself to influential national models, given their long-standing authority. The European processes may rely on their historically and globally successful models—German, French—to provide an alternative to the American hegemonic model. Yet the British model has many similarities to the American, providing a bridge for Anglophone principals and developments to spread within Europe directly.<sup>2</sup>

In the normative dimension, we expect that the proposed standards for European skill formation will be general, not be content specific, and leave room for interpretation to the nation-states because this avoids controversy and contention resulting from harmonization attempts. Even within Europe, there are strongly contrasting models in skill formation. Too-specific proposals for standards or precisely defined organizational forms and target groups would have challenged such consensual agreements at the supranational level.

In regulative terms, although the nation-state retains authority over education, some elements, such as educational exchange, extend beyond the national. Thus, we expect that the residual policy-making power left for Europe will be limited to those areas that no nation-state can easily organize or manage on its own, such as programs for cross-border mobility.

## DATA AND METHOD: THEORY-GUIDED CONTENT ANALYSIS

To identify the components of the emerging European model and to explore the relative similarity of the European and national models, we conducted a “theory-guided qualitative content analysis” (Gläser and Laudel 2009) of the English-language versions of key documents relating to the Bologna and Copenhagen processes. Thus, historical and contemporary sources—specifically, official EU documents—were used to compare the model's ideational and normative underpinnings. We analyzed European declarations signed by the nation-states that inaugurated these two processes of Europeanization and the communiqués, signed by participating country representatives, that concluded the follow-up conferences every two years. In total, eight HE documents and five VET documents were selected.<sup>3</sup> These documents refer to and justify the joint goals set forth in the deliberations. They describe agreed-upon standards that the member states should reach of their own volition and use to evaluate the success of the process.

Beyond the communiqués, a large and diverse set of documents guiding the Bologna and Copenhagen processes exists, such as stocktaking reports (e.g., Zgaga 2003) and innumerable national documents. Because we are concerned with the European consensus, as it emerged from 1998 to 2010, not with the interpretation of any specific actor, we focus here on the joint declarations and statements. These documents represent the result of an extended negotiation and editing process that represents a resolution of conflicting views. Because of the high level of these intergovernmental discussions and the short form of these documents, as well as the limits of EU authority in education, they do not specify many detailed regulations.

While we theoretically derived overarching categories in advance, further categories and their specific occurrences or values found in the materials were inductively gathered. These overarching categories, which could be used to analyze any educational model, are divided among the cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative dimensions. To decipher the ideational elements, we examined the stated ideals and goals in HE and VET and the arguments used to legitimate European reforms, which reveal the underlying assumptions and



specific understandings of VET and HE. To analyze the normative dimension of the European model, we asked, Which are the main target groups and in which representative organizational form are they educated? Which standards should be introduced and how is the relationship between general and vocational education characterized (e.g., stratified)? To evaluate regulative elements, we asked how skill formation should be regulated, governed, and financed at the national and European levels.

We analyzed the European model on its own terms instead of carrying out specific searches for characteristics of national models. Establishing our classification system was a theory-guided interpretative process, in which we generated our materials stepwise, continuously refining the values of previously defined categories. To ensure reliability, each document was coded by at least two members of our research team. A large set of categories was generated with corresponding text passages: approximately 3,000 items for each process. By looking at HE and VET together, we aim to transcend the usual dichotomy, finding areas of both overlap and distinctiveness.

In a second step, we compared the European model with the ideal-types of originally influential national models derived from secondary analysis. We asked which of these were prominent and whether the characteristics of one national model are dominant. This stepwise process ensured that the characteristics of the European model were independently identified.

## THE EMERGENT EUROPEAN MODEL: HIGHER EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

In this section, we sketch key characteristics of the emergent European model and analyze similarities and differences in ideals, goals, legitimation arguments, norms and standards, and governance, concentrating on the quantitatively measured importance of topics.

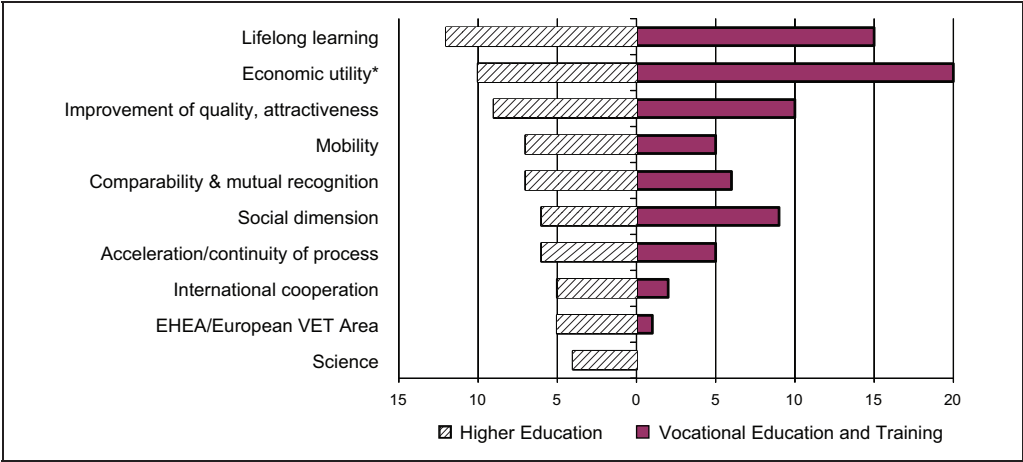
### *Comparing the Bologna and Copenhagen Processes, 1998–2010*

In comparing these processes, we contrast goals and arguments that legitimate the proposed ideals. The ideals of both Bologna and Copenhagen

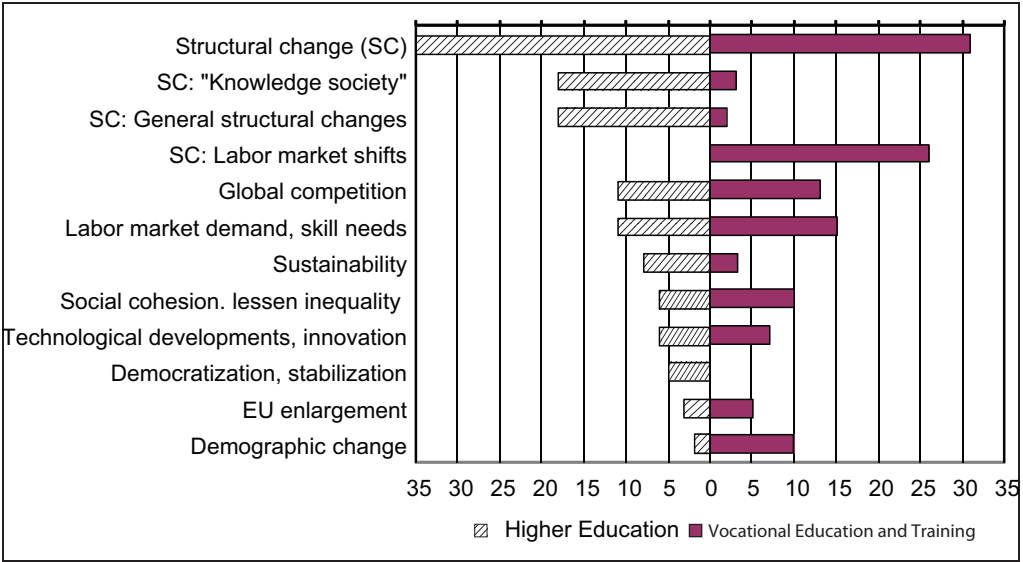
processes include the following: to ensure lifelong learning, to bolster global competitiveness and individual employability, and to maintain and enhance the quality and attractiveness of European skill formation (see Figure 1). In HE, worldwide mobility and openness as well as mutual recognition and understanding of national qualifications are also vital, named repeatedly as goals for the process—and mentioned as crucial to continue and accelerate Europeanization. Aims include supporting science and international cooperation and establishing a European Higher Education Area. For VET, the attainment of economic goals—employability, competitiveness—was highest on the agenda. Other goals in VET include mutual recognition and understanding of national qualifications. The goal of social cohesion and inclusion was more often discussed in the Copenhagen process (VET), while in the Bologna documents (HE) this aspect of fostering a social dimension remained rather abstract. However, in terms of objectives, the two skill-formation reform agendas are relatively similar, embedded as they are in the larger Lisbon strategy to bolster European economic competitiveness through education and general proclamations of European unity, identity, and self-awareness.

While we found considerable overlap in the arguments to legitimate Europeanization, there are important differences that reflect the specific foci of each organizational field (see Figure 2). Here, particularities of HE and VET remain evident at the supranational level. Many statements, reports, and action programs reify the distinctions between general HE and VET, discussed as they are among different stakeholders with different principles and priorities.

To legitimate reforms, in both processes major economic structural changes, such as Europe's being increasingly constituted by knowledge societies, are the most often mentioned arguments: In VET, changes in labor markets, such as tertiarization and upgraded skill needs, were identified as crucial, whereas their effects on HE remain underspecified. When services rise vis-à-vis production that traditionally demand highly educated or well-trained workers, there should be corresponding shifts in skill-formation systems. Unsurprisingly, the specific skill needs of the labor market are significant in both processes, as is global economic competition. While the broadest notion of sustainability was identified primarily in Bologna, the EU enlargement and demographic change were more often mentioned in



**Figure 1.** Key European ideals and goals in higher education and vocational training (in percentages)  
Note: The selected goals represent 73 percent of the 578 total coded passages in the higher education documents and 71 percent of 433 coded passages in the vocational training documents of all mentioned ideals and goals. \*Economic utility represents a variety of themes: employability, competitiveness of European skill formation systems, skill production, labor market relevant degrees, economic development, and the “knowledge society.”

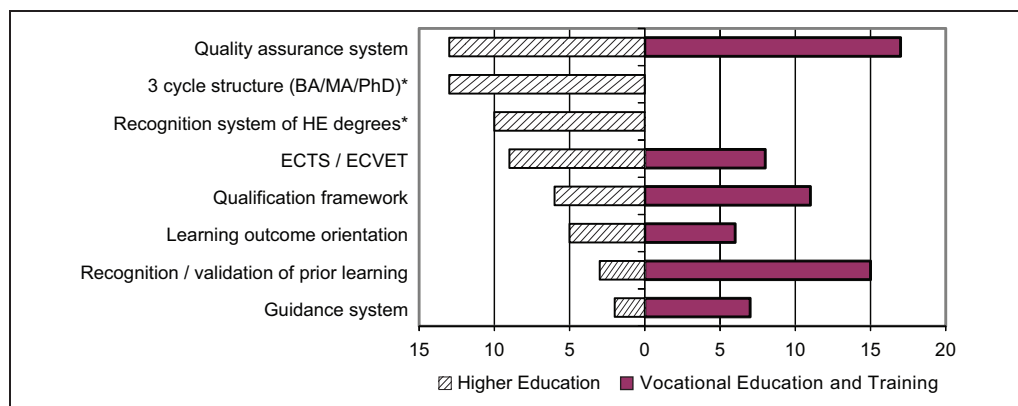


**Figure 2.** Key European legitimization arguments, higher education and vocational training (in percentages)  
Note: The selected legitimization arguments represent 88 percent of the 62 total coded passages in the higher education documents and 94 percent of 61 coded passages in the vocational training documents.

Copenhagen. Technology and innovation were prevalent topics in both processes, but with more emphasis on science in HE. The legitimacy of these European reforms thus rests primarily on concrete global or societal needs and developments in labor markets that rely on human capital.

Recognizing that boundaries between the cultural-cognitive and normative dimensions are often fluid, we turn to the norms at a general level and then delve into specific standards (see Figure 3). In HE, the major theme is mobility, perhaps the most genuinely European of all the themes, given





**Figure 3.** Key European standards, higher education and vocational training (in percentages)

Note: The selected standards represent 61 percent of the 217 total coded passages in the higher education documents and 64 percent of 149 coded passages in the vocational training documents. \*Specific to higher education.

that it—at least in terms of geography—transcends the nation-state. Whether understood as an umbrella category emphasizing the European vision of a comprehensive ability to move across borders or more specifically for particular groups—of teachers, staff, and students—mobility was identified repeatedly as a norm to be reached by all educational groups, whether students, staff, or scientists. Yet mobility was most often defined as spatial flexibility to move horizontally between cultural spaces rather than vertically in terms of social advance or socioeconomic status differences within stratified societies.

Mobility norms (educational, spatial) were also ubiquitous in the Copenhagen process. Another major topic—indeed, a highly political one—was the target group for VET. While a nonissue in HE, the situation of disadvantaged learners and low-skilled persons is key in VET because of its role in many societies as a program serving primarily those without alternatives. Youth with disadvantages whose low school performance is a barrier to further education was repeatedly stated in relation to VET. Such an evaluation is controversial especially in those countries with “collective skill systems” (Busemeyer and Trampusch 2011), such as Austria, Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland, where VET provides an attractive pathway, ensures low youth unemployment rates, and thus is by no means a source of marginalization—quite the contrary. A key difference between HE and VET was the organizational forms in which learning should ideally take place, with Copenhagen referring to workplaces as significant settings for training.

Topping the list of topics in the definition of standards was attention to quality assurance. The cycles or degree structure was part of the HE dialogue, as was the innovative orientation to learning outcomes instead of inputs, also important in VET. By contrast, the need for some guidance system, such as academic mentoring, internship placement, or even career planning, was mentioned only in VET. The European Qualifications Framework, as a reference system that relates to all levels of education and integrates formal, nonformal, and informal learning outcomes, and the recognition of prior learning were key in both processes. Both the European Credit Transfer System in HE and the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training were presented as facilitators of spatial mobility.

Finally, in contrast to the other two dimensions, the regulative remained underspecified and underrepresented, as expected for a policy field in which supranational governance has limited authority. It remains unclear which actors in the individual countries should have the greatest influence. Because nation-states continue to tightly govern their education systems, the documents defer to member countries without much regulatory interference. Nevertheless, questions such as who should finance skill formation or who should take part in the decision-making process are tackled. In contrast to HE, which is to be mainly state funded, in VET, private funding is regarded as a necessary component. Concerning the national governance of these organizational fields, all stakeholders are to be included in decision-making processes, in particular in VET.

However, the main theme is the European-level governance of these processes themselves because this represents the most significant foray of the EU to date into shaping education and training policy. Thus, the open method of coordination and its comparative procedures, such as benchmarking or stock-taking, were discussed routinely as the decade unfolded.

In sum, we find more concordance than disagreement between the two parallel processes of Europeanization in skill formation. Especially the topics of quality and excellence, mobility, globalization, employability, qualification frameworks, and the recognition of prior learning have been high on the agenda of both processes. Nevertheless, our analyses also uncovered important differences. VET is more tightly coupled to labor markets and includes more of the social dimension (cohesion, disadvantaged groups) than does HE. Whereas HE tends to be more prospective (general, less defined), VET responds to current, quantifiable employment needs. Building on the findings of our content analysis, we now sketch the emerging European model of skill formation that unites elements of both HE and VET.

### ***The New European Model in Skill Formation***

The findings and interpretations of the content analysis provide a synthetic model of skill formation in Europe. The model orients itself toward such issues as the goals of HE and VET and to normative criteria such as representative organizational forms, specific social groups served, and standards. The model also includes some policy-related elements manifest in the documents. At the core of the European model lies the notion of individual competence or capability. In Europe, this is clearly paired with the flexibility to adapt to the oft-noted knowledge society and changing labor market conditions and concrete demands. The goal of European HE is to produce knowledgeable individuals who will succeed in societies in the midst of transformative economic and technological change.

The contemporary HE ideal-type, subscribed to worldwide, includes a vision of the globally competitive, research-focused university (see Mohrman, Ma, and Baker 2008), without, however, identifying specifics. If science—and the academic freedom necessary to sustain it—is to be maintained by state sponsorship, as in Continental Europe, then the public must be

served by or receive some benefit from it. HE should be research based, presumably to ensure the competitiveness and innovation that has been placed on center stage, as in Germany.

In VET, the ideals for Europe are heterogeneous and legitimated by a broad array of arguments. The ideal of VET most often represented in the European documents is the competence to continuously develop one's own abilities, in the sense of lifelong learning. Furthermore, the model conveys a certain entrepreneurship in developing and managing one's own career. In terms of goals, the VET ideal most reflects employability aspects. Promoting employability rests on arguments that economic needs and labor markets are changing, that there are and will be skill shortages, and that Europe faces growing competition in globalized markets.

Technological developments and demographic shifts seem to legitimate the devolution of responsibility for education and employment security to the individual. In both organizational fields, responsibility for learning is mainly a prerogative of individuals. The social dimension of allocation within stratified skill-formation systems remains largely unspoken, especially in HE.

Extending our synopsis to the normative dimension, the target groups are clearly divergent. Whereas the target group for HE includes those who are capable, based on implicit, unnamed meritocratic criteria, VET is to open to all. VET often serves individuals suffering disadvantage, such as those with special educational needs, those of minority ethnic background, and school dropouts, among others. In both cases, personal (spatial) mobility also serves as a norm, especially for those considered high potentials in VET.

The representative HE organizational form is the university; however, its characteristics remain underspecified, permitting the extant diversity within Europe to persevere. Even the seemingly obvious three-cycle system of undergraduate and graduate degrees, followed by the doctoral level as the basis for science and innovation, exhibits a diversity of durations at national and regional levels. HE institutions are to standardize their degrees, especially given global competition, and HE should be or have an active link to research to ensure contributions to science.

By contrast to the within-system view of HE, VET straddles the education/economy nexus, and consequently work-based learning is a crucial norm for VET in Europe. However, the organizational forms involved remain underspecified, as

they do in HE, which allows the diverse national models and contemporary systems to continue operating without a critical juncture or challenge to their traditional practices. Training in Europe today occurs in the workplace and in a range of training institutions, especially vocational schools (as in France). Furthermore, these systems should aim to supply training at all qualificational levels. The strengthening of the so-called knowledge triangle of education, research, and innovation is prioritized. Vocational standards combine basic skills or key competencies, such as reading and writing, and specific work-based skills. The orientation is toward learning outcomes, and these can be compared transnationally with clear standards set forth in the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training and the European Qualifications Framework. Indeed, such tools should enhance the readability or transparency of qualifications, a pan-European goal since the Treaty of Rome of 1957 to foster worker mobility within European labor markets (Bouder et al. 2008).

Finally, lifelong learning is often mentioned as a norm for both fields. Quality and qualifications based on learning outcomes are to be ensured through the application of qualification framework principles at all educational levels and in both organizational fields of HE and VET. To facilitate careers and development, the identification and validation of prior learning, whether formal or informal, is a crucial norm in Europe's programs for vocational standardization, as it is in HE. Again, in which organizational forms exactly these skills are to be attained is not clearly specified in these documents. In VET, if phases of in-firm/work-based training aim to encourage familiarity with good practice, the duration of training in firms is also not explicitly given. A proportion of general courses is required, but no amount is quantified as a standard. Such courses go beyond initial basic skills to include foreign languages and adult training or participation in lifelong learning. Importantly, these periods of study can open the pathway to general education or even HE, especially if the skills can be identified and prior learning recognized and validated.

In regulative terms, the European skill-formation model contrasts a decentralized HE administration that ensures more or less autonomy of universities with VET, in which a range of stakeholders, in particular firms and trade unions, are involved. The latter conveys a corporatist notion of governance. In both HE and VET,

individual entrepreneurialism and firms' investment in skill formation have risen in importance. Nevertheless, according to Bologna, the HE system still should be mainly state sponsored.

Summarized, the European model is one that attempts to produce knowledgeable and capable individuals who assume responsibility for their own destinies. They are to be educated in globally competitive universities or in the workplace, where they prepare to continue learning and react flexibly to broad structural changes and labor market demands. This model of skill formation reflected in the pan-European documents provides templates for constructing, reforming, or incrementally adjusting national skill-formation systems. This synthetic portrayal of a powerful new European model—itsself an international argument—we now compare to the most influential national models that constitute but also conflict with this new vision for HE and VET as institutionalized in Bologna and Copenhagen.

## ANALYZING THE INFLUENTIAL NATIONAL MODELS IN SKILL FORMATION: GERMANY, FRANCE, BRITAIN, AND THE UNITED STATES

Having presented a synopsis of the emergent European model, we here sketch the ideal-types of national models that were historically especially influential in HE and VET in Europe—the German, French, British—as well as the American (see, e.g., Ben-David [1977] 1992; Bosch and Charest 2010; Clark 1993; Cummings 1999; Goldschmidt 1991). Again, the description of the models combines all three institutional dimensions, presenting crucial origins of the systems, their development, and contemporary challenges, up to the status of Bologna and Copenhagen reforms today (see Table 1).

### Germany

The German model was the first preeminent model. Ideal-typically, it stands for appropriate education for research-based and scientific activities and VET for well-developed, comprehensive vocational competence (*Beruflichkeit*) offered to distinct groups depending on prior primary-level school performance and secondary-level educational attainment (Powell and Solga 2011). The

**Table 1.** Higher Education (HE) and Vocational Training (VET) Models of Germany, France, Great Britain, United States, and Europe (Ideal-types)

|   | Germany  | France  | Great Britain  | United States   | Europe (1998/99–)   |
|---|--|---|--|---|---|
| <b>Cultural-cognitive dimension</b>                               |  |   |  |   |   |
| Ideal/goal HE   | "Loyal mandarin": provide civil servants for state administration, produce scientific research | "Technical elite": provide civil servants for state administration and business                               | "Educated gentleman": classical learning canon, educate ruling class | "Democratic citizen": individuals continuously developing           | "Competent individual": produce knowledgeable individuals                                 |
| Ideal/goal VET  | Comprehensive vocational competence ( <i>Beruflichkeit</i> )                                   | Vocationally specific theoretical preparation   | Competence to carry out specific tasks                               | Competence to carry out specific tasks                              | Competence to develop oneself, entrepreneurial careers                                    |
| <b>Normative dimension</b>  |  |   |  |   |   |
| Target group HE   | Educational "elite" ( <i>Bildungsbürgertum</i> )<br>Everyone                                   | "Elite" (meritocratic)<br>Broad, but especially low school achievers  | "Upper class"  | Middle class and above  | Those who are capable (meritocracy)<br>Everyone, but especially disadvantaged             |
| Target group VET  |  |   | Low school achievers, disadvantaged youth                            | Low school achievers, disadvantaged youth                           |   |
| Representative HE organization form                               | Research university (relatively equal status), research and teaching                           | <i>Grande école</i> (technical training in specialized HE organizations), differentiated HE                   | Undergraduate college  | Differentiated system from community college to research university | Competitive research university, range from undergraduate teaching to science/innovation  |
| Representative VET organization form (where learning takes place) | Dual system (apprenticeship, i.e., in-firm training supplemented by a vocational school)       | Vocational school, school-based training partly supplemented by in-firm training phases ( <i>alternance</i> ) | In-firm, on the job  | In-firm, on the job   | Phases of work-based learning and basic skills (general), place of learning not specified |

*continued*

**Table 1. (Continued)**

|  | Germany  | France   | Great Britain   | United States   | Europe (1998/99–)  |
|--|--|--|---|---|--|
| <b>Regulative dimension</b>                          |  |  |   |   |  |
| HE administration                                    | Quasi-decentralized; state sponsorship, scientific autonomy                                      | Administrative centralization, state sponsorship                 | Decentralized, autonomy under state guardianship, market displacing state sponsorship | Decentralized, market-based system with distributed control | Decentralized, autonomous organizations, state sponsorship with some privatization, academic freedom |
| VET administration: process for regulatory revisions | Corporatist, regulations defined jointly by the social partners (employers and unions) and state | State-controlled, partially employers; social partners consulted | Mainly employers  | Mainly employers  | Corporatist notion, broad stakeholder participation  |

Source: European and contemporary models, summary by the authors. See also Ben-David ([1977] 1992), Cummings (1999), Goldschmidt (1991), Kerr (1978), Koch and Reuling (1998), Clark and Winch (2007), and Bosch and Charest (2010).

German Humboldtian university ideal places primacy on autonomous science and valorizes the unity of teaching and research. Following an original Prussian vision of the “loyal mandarin” (Cummings 1999:424), it provides the state with either researchers or dutiful state civil servants and (re)produces the education-based elite or *Bildungsbürgertum*. Everyone is expected to combine theory and practice to become comprehensively vocationally competent, whether through research and teaching or an apprenticeship that combines schooling and workplace training. The contemporary target groups and the historically typical organizational forms are clearly defined. Comprehensive dual training should be available to all: Provided in a unique combination of settings of in-firm training supplemented by vocational schooling, the system is regulated consensually by employers (and their associations), trade unions, and the state.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, access to nearly tuition free HE is limited to a minority; even today less than a third of each cohort attains tertiary certificates. HE should take place in broadly equal, state-financed research universities that enjoy scientific autonomy. If HE administration is quasi-decentralized, the VET system is mostly corporatist, with regulations defined by the social partners and partially centralized. The preeminent Western country in science prior to World War I, Germany today divides its research efforts between independent research institutes and universities. If the classic dual system of apprenticeship training continues to provide a model other countries emulate, this segment’s performance has declined, with only two fifths of each age cohort participating (Powell and Solga 2011). The Bologna process has had considerable effects in German HE through implementation of the three-cycle degree (BA/MA/doctorate) reform, whereas the impact of the Copenhagen process on VET in Germany has thus far been modest, despite attempts to implement qualification frameworks.

## France

By contrast to Germany’s distinct HE and VET systems, the French model refers to an originally state-centered meritocracy that provides mostly school-based learning opportunities. The key ideal has been technical specialization, from basic vocational schooling to the highest-level professional preparation for elite careers in a highly differentiated HE system, including a range of schools and

universities. The *grande école*, the representative organizational form of French HE, delivers elite professional training and serves to prepare civil servants, engineers, and the business elite. This construction of a “technical elite” (Cummings 1999:424) embraces both purely theoretical academic education and specialized vocational HE. However, practical experience in firms is traditionally not an organized part of HE nor a requirement of vocational schooling. Unlike in Germany, major target groups of VET are low school achievers, and VET takes place in schools that also favor more general, theory-based education, even if more recently this has been supplemented by phases of in-firm training (*alternance*) (see Bosch and Charest 2010). In the regulative dimension, the state continues to play the major role in both HE and VET—funding and regulating education standards—even if universities have gained more autonomy (Musselin 2009). The social partners, especially firms and their associations, have only recently been more intensively integrated in the VET governance, as this becomes less centralized. Regarding both Bologna and Copenhagen, France seems to prefer to stand by its traditions, eased by the relative similarity of its skill-formation system to the stipulations and standards set forth in the Europeanization processes.

## Great Britain

The British model reflects a system originally supporting classical education for a select few to become “educated gentlemen” of the ruling class (Cummings 1999:424). Thus, as in France, the original target group was a tiny elite. These young men were served by a classical learning canon in the leading colleges of Cambridge and Oxford, and these exemplary HE organizations became an attractive model around the world, especially in the Commonwealth countries. That traditional image is, however, far removed from the system’s contemporary reality, in which the state is massively retracting its support, leading to marketization (Head 2011). The HE system includes prestigious institutions of higher learning but also universities oriented toward undergraduate education, less toward research. Although state-financed and continuously reformed apprenticeship programs exist and have expanded the number of apprenticeships (with places transmitted by a range of training providers—not through direct employer contact), overall, the system is unstandardized and unregulated, thus employer



dominated. Disadvantaged youth may receive state support to attain their vocational aims, but competencies to carry out specific tasks are mainly earned through on-the-job training. While HE autonomy was long guaranteed under state guardianship and HE administration decentralized, emphases on markets (and tuition fees) and individual responsibility have increased. Manifesting the decoupling between the rhetorics of Europeanization and the structures of skill-formation systems, UK HE has been active in the Bologna process from the start—with limited impact in the aims or practices of individual universities, many already operating internationally (Graf 2009). This holds also for the Copenhagen process, in which the existence of credit transfer systems—National Vocational Qualifications in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework—preempted the European Qualification Framework.

### United States

The U.S. model is more similar to that of the United Kingdom than the other models in terms of regulation and administration (and contemporary situation). Yet it is also democratic, less selective, and oriented toward the “continuously developing individual” (Cummings 1999:424). Serving millions of students every year, expansive American HE is part of a fundamentally global HE system (Schofer and Meyer 2005). Despite its preeminent research universities, the American system of HE is also the most diverse in the world. Colleges and universities in the United States offer an exceptionally broad array of programs, varying in quality, reputation, duration, and cost. If top universities are leading global brands in education and science (Ramirez 2006), they represent a tiny fraction of the literally thousands of HE institutions—ranging from distinctive liberal arts colleges (Clark 1970) to community colleges (Brint and Karabel 1989). This diversity contributes to differentiated courses of study and degrees in general education that eclipse specific VET. Indeed, long ago VET was all but removed from the comprehensive high school (Kliebard 1999). Even today, when college tuition often outstrips the median annual salary, notions of college for all dominate everyday discussions of the best ticket to economic security and social status. In American VET, on-the-job learning and firms are paramount, rather than the state or collaboration between government and business or labor.

Individuals themselves bear most training costs, especially in general qualification programs, with employers investing mainly in job-specific, relevant skill development. The American model emphasizes access to learning opportunities far more than it can deliver accountability for often limited outcomes of collegiate learning (Arum and Roksa 2011). It idealizes individuals who are responsible for their own futures, who aspire to democratic citizenship, and who earn skills that are attained and sold in market-based arenas. If general education is for all, and professional education for the well-off, specific vocational-technical training remains a program serving mainly disadvantaged youth who lack other opportunities on account of their low socioeconomic status and/or school performance. In the United States, the Copenhagen process is unheard of, whereas some initiatives have begun to borrow concepts and standards developed in the Bologna process (Adelman 2009; Brookes & Huisman 2009). Thus, in the United States and Europe, very different skill-formation models and contemporary situations exist, but the Bologna and Copenhagen processes can offer all these national systems an array of solutions to commonly acknowledged problems.

## COMPARING THE EUROPEAN MODEL AND NATIONAL MODELS

If historically this select group of countries has provided especially influential educational models, the contemporary European processes analyzed above again give advocates of these models a platform to expound their advantages. In brief review, we expected to find that cultural-cognitive and normative aspects—and the corresponding mimetic and normative mechanisms of diffusion—would be more prevalent than the regulative and coercive. Indeed, the regulative is less significant than the other two dimensions in the Bologna and Copenhagen initiatives, as measured in the documents establishing the new European model. In cultural-cognitive terms, the importance of education systems for social reproduction and economic productivity results in a diversity of ideals and concepts that reflect influential national models long identified as keys to global competitiveness. We found some correspondence to the American model's democratic citizen and French tradition

of equality, but the focus is rather on a new type of individual who entrepreneurially develops her or his competencies continuously. This distinct European model was also visible in the normative dimension, in a meritocratic understanding of targeting those who are capable in HE and everyone in VET, but especially disadvantaged individuals. We expected that the model would leave room for interpretation among nation-states that boast differing skill-formation systems—and it does. This individual-focused European model allows flexibility in borrowing and emulation, since each culture may determine who is capable and who is deserving of state assistance. As expected, standards remained abstract, identifying participation rates and targets but not specifying contents or curricula, and the organizational forms and target groups were specified but not narrowly defined. We expected a focus on elements, such as educational exchange, that are genuinely supranational and thus within the realm of multilevel governance. And we found that when mobility was discussed, it was geographical, not upward/downward mobility in class position or compensation of (educational and social) disadvantage.

Our conclusion, derived from our comparison of the European with the German, French, British, and American models, especially in ideals, is that the emerging European model of skill formation, devised in part as an explicit strategy to compete with the United States, relies on different traditional European strengths as well as the American focus on the individual and thus exhibits a strong bricolage. In terms of norms and standards, national models clearly manifest their inspiration or influence. Comparing the ideals of the HE system, the connection between research and teaching—as in the original Humboldtian ideal—combines with the state financing of universities characteristic of conservative welfare states (France, Germany). However, these traditional ideals are cloaked in Anglophone competition for global prestige and talent that emphasize individual organizations, not the broader distinctions of organizational forms, such as the *grandes écoles* or universities of applied science (*Fachhochschulen*).

In the European model, throughout HE and VET, the focus is less on citizens than on future employees. The goal is to prepare employable individuals capable of steering their own learning and work careers during economic, demographic, and technological transformation. The responsibility for achievement and attainment and

transitioning to labor markets lies squarely with individuals, who should be flexible and mobile, although social mobility is given little emphasis in the European documents. In that, the European model has an affinity with liberal individualism characteristic of the United States and Great Britain. However, civic aspects that would foster the development of active citizenship, as in the American model, are underrepresented except in educational exchange across Europe.

Standards correspond to Anglophone models, such as in the degree cycles or the credit transfer systems that facilitate mobility, yet neither fully qualify nor limit diploma holders to carry out specific occupations. Degrees and courses of study often vary considerably even within a country, although the European documents hardly problematize persistent regional disparities. Degree specificity remains the prerogative of individual HE organizations; it is more likely to be a university than an organization that trains professional elites like a *grande école*. In this sense, the target group of HE is not isomorphic to the ideal-typical elite formation of the classical models in Europe but likewise fails to embrace the goal of expansive inclusion implied by the U.S. model of college for all. Membership in the group attending university is still restricted to those who are capable, whereas nothing is said about how capability is defined—or by whom.

Concerning the regulative dimension of HE, only minor hints are given in the European model. The suggested contribution of state sponsorship of universities and autonomy of science carries forward semblances of the German tradition. Yet the model turns toward Anglophone ideals when the focus is on the entrepreneurial, such as the increasing private investment in HE, in rankings of HE organizations, and in the focus on specific globally competitive organizations.

In VET, the German ideal-type is represented by elements of corporatism and work-based learning. The French model is reflected in the differentiation of levels of VET, which should principally offer education at all qualificational levels. The focus on integrating disadvantaged individuals reflects the French, British, and American models. Yet the European VET model, in aiming for comprehensive training and problem solving, is antithetical to the Anglophone reliance on specific and limited on-the-job training. However, instead of the German norm of comprehensive vocational competence, the

documents speak of employability, with recognition of informal and nonformal learning that is closer to the American notion of well-rounded potential employees with soft skills. Continuing training and lifelong learning are newer and more global ideals that are also well represented in the emerging European model.

## DISCUSSION

In this comprehensive content analysis, we explored the elements of the European model of skill formation that combines ideals and goals of VET and HE explicitly in the parallel Bologna and Copenhagen processes. Mirroring the European tradition in which skill formation relies jointly but independently on HE and VET systems to create a flexible and capable workforce, this emergent model carries elements of both organizational fields. Responsibility for investing in education and training lies with individuals, as the European model identifies employability, not citizenship, as the central goal of education and training. Questions relating to social inclusion or issues of equity were hardly discussed, despite the fact that European integration implies far more than market integration, to include civic and social participation, and cultural exchange and identity formation. Even if transnational mobility was a core theme throughout, this suggests a lost opportunity for European integration.

As expected, the European model exhibits elements and foci—primarily in the cultural-cognitive and normative dimensions, but also in the regulative—that have affinities to the skill-formation systems of influential players in the consensus-oriented Europe-wide processes as well as to the U.S. model. We find that these processes do not reflect the elements of one hegemonic national model. Instead the model is an assemblage of diverse characteristics—a bricolage—that more or less resembles the models of highly influential countries. Contrasting our content analysis of the European declarations and communiqués with the established national models, we found neither the dominance of German science seen a century ago nor the rampant “Americanization” (Berghahn 2010) often assumed today. While the American and British models retain their attraction in HE, for now, the same cannot be said for VET, in which the German training model remains influential.

No single national model provided the complete source of ideals, goals, legitimacy arguments, or

standards for skill-formation reform in Europe during the past decade, reflecting the *modus operandi* of these intergovernmental processes: As presented in the Bologna and Copenhagen documents and derived through the open method of coordination, the emerging European model results from competitive and consensus-building processes. Regardless of the power of these single country models and the systems behind them, general ideas and norms, such as employability and lifelong learning, are common to most contemporary systems. While some countries defend their institutionalized skill-formation systems, others use these transnational processes mainly as devices to justify national reform preferences and priorities. Increasingly, internationalized education and science systems survey a multitude of sources from which to borrow ideas, norms, or policies.

In sum, this analysis shows that the European reforms build on the traditional strengths of centuries of European HE and VET and thus (more or less) reflect national models, with some resemblance to certain American principles, such as the focus on the individual. The model of skill formation proposed in Europe, already having an impact far beyond the borders of the EU, consists of diverse ideals and standards. Indeed, the Bologna and Copenhagen processes seem to reduce controversy by emphasizing general, abstract themes with affinities to strong national models that have spread their influence across borders for decades and centuries. In so doing, the European reforms of skill formation of the past decade carry on the tradition of learning from others.

Ascribing their own influence to or utilizing these initiatives has facilitated a remarkable consensus among the top policy makers in dozens of countries. Yet decision makers would do well to explicitly compare the components of the European and their own national systems if they hope to translate and effectively transfer these diverse principles. Especially where the European and the national differ, implementing these ambitious programs will be far more challenging than signing declarations. Developments at national and organizational levels have been more contentious, leading to interest group mobilization and even mass student protests. Yet because the organizational forms that should carry out skill formation and the social groups that should participate in and benefit from these opportunities remain underspecified, the inequalities resulting from implementation of this new model remain difficult to predict.

These European initiatives to standardize skill formation, while considerably influential, are only the latest salvo of attempts to learn from others. They utilize the age-old strategy of using international arguments to legitimate reforms or to implement elements found in successful other countries. While those European countries that have been major sources of models—Germany, France, and Britain—may be less challenged to meet the ideals and standards of European skill formation identified here, all countries have made and continue to make changes in their skill-formation systems to match the perceived ideals and to achieve the international standards codified in this emergent model. Even the United States, with its extraordinary universities, competes in global scientific and economic marketplaces in which Europe, through the Bologna and Copenhagen processes, strengthens its competitiveness.

The European model does not present defined curricula and contents but rather particular forms to facilitate the global competition of skill-formation systems. Identifying the challenges facing societies, the model distinguishes ideals, norms, and governance in skill formation and blends elements of successful systems. In contrast to the U.S. model, the European includes both HE and VET as significant sources of skill formation, with employability high on the European agenda more so than the ideals of social integration or democratic citizenship. On both sides of the Atlantic, responsibility for meeting the challenges of changing labor market conditions lies squarely with the individual, although nation-states have the duty to maintain skill-formation systems—at which they are more or less successful. The European processes do less to identify necessary changes to ameliorate persistent educational and social inequalities than they rely on standardization as a strategy to deal with disparities across the dozens of participating countries. In that, European multilevel governance of skill formation and national autonomy mirrors American decentralization and limited policy-making authority over skill formation.

Reflecting economic globalization, educational and scientific competition between countries and continents has increased, due in large measure to increased spatial mobility (as migration or educational exchange), the dominance of a few major world languages in science, and globe-spanning networks based on information technologies. Markets for individual investments in education and for skills among firms are increasingly transnational. Yet education policies often replicate older understandings

that remain oriented toward national markets. Addressing common challenges and international competition, the Bologna and Copenhagen processes both signal and intensify a paradigm shift to systematic attempts to learn from others. The portrayed traditional and newer ideals in contemporary education models demand attention from sociologists of education who wish to gauge the impact of foreign models—and to provide meaningful options for education reforms as these countries strive to meet a quintessential challenge of our age: to transform the ideal of a knowledge society—made up of individuals with the capabilities to learn throughout the life course—into reality.

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## NOTES

1. While both processes are now acknowledged as part of the open method of coordination, Bologna in fact began in 1998 as an initiative of national representatives of just four countries meeting in Paris to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the Sorbonne, namely, France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. By contrast, the European Union was involved in the Copenhagen process from the beginning. The European Qualifications Framework and the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training have both been explicitly guided by the open method of coordination.
2. Examples include the three-year English BA course of study instead of the four-year American or the privatization of higher education in both countries, exemplified in retrenchment of state support and in rising tuition fees.
3. The Bologna process documents are the following: Sorbonne Declaration (1998), Bologna Declaration (1999), Prague Communiqué (2001), Berlin Communiqué (2003), Bergen Communiqué (2005), London Communiqué (2007), Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009), and Budapest/Vienna

- Declaration (2010). The Copenhagen process documents are the following: Copenhagen Declaration (2002), Maastricht Communiqué (2004), Helsinki Communiqué (2006), and Bordeaux Communiqué (2008). Finally, we include the Education and Training 2020 framework (2009). See <http://ec.europa.eu/education>.
4. *Dual* stands for an apprentice's education concurrently in the workplace and in vocational school that combines acquisition of skills on the job and school-based general and technical education.
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## BIOS

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